Duncan Teague: Artist and Activist

A Profile of one of our Members

by Barry Stewart Mann

Born "sometime during the Kennedy administration" to a Baptist minister father and a beauty-shop owner mother, Duncan Teague remembers a fascinating childhood. He was "an effeminate, gifted child" who began taking the stage in front of church audiences by the age of 4.

Unknowingly, Duncan was an existentialist even as a youngster. While other kids were joining the church and 'giving their souls to Jesus Christ' at the age of 8 or 9, Duncan was questioning. He already felt like a part of the church — why should he go through Baptism? Not to mention that he was mortally afraid of it.

He always had great role models: his parents; his cousin Laverne, who lived with the family and was like an older sister; and Dr. Charles C. Wheeler III, a black pastor with a Ph.D. who had studied in England and was Duncan's very good friend.

By choice, Duncan attended parochial high school. He began singing as an adolescent, which gained him acceptance among peers who were otherwise leery of the 'preacher's son.' He was also becoming aware of his homosexuality, and trying to reconcile it with his church background. In high school he was voted Senior Class President as well as the one with the "Cutest Walk." Most of his friends knew he was probably gay.

Toward the end of high school, Duncan came out to his two best friends. They were not surprised. He held off coming out to his parents until a few years later; they took it horribly. To this day, he says, "they still deal in denial and cognitive dissonance."

Duncan attended Ottawa University and then Benedictine College, both in Kansas. At the Baptist school, they forgave sex but frowned on drinking; conversely, at the Catholic institution, drinking was accepted, but not sex. Of course, neither place was open to homosexuality. Duncan continued to sing and immersed himself in the theatre, earning a degree in Theatre Arts.

It became apparent shortly after his college graduation that "everything in the universe" wanted Duncan to leave Kansas. He joined a cousin in Atlanta, and pursued a career in theater here. But it was BWMT — Black & White Men Together — that changed his life. Duncan joined an AIDS Education Committee and began making speeches, "seducing audiences" into learning about safe sex. This was back in the mid-80's, when the epidemic was young, and many things were not yet discussed, especially with Duncan's brand of humor and irreverence.

When he began working for AID Atlanta as a Black Gay Male Outreach Worker, the job title said it all. He went on to work with the National Task Force on AIDS Prevention, while doing occasional performances with SAME — Southeastern Arts Media Education.

For years, Duncan wrestled on and off with Christianity. He attended the Metropolitan Community Church for a while, but it was a BWMT dance at First E. that convinced him to come back over one Sunday morning to check out the fellowship. He attended a Martin Luther King Day service, and was immediately sold.

Duncan now works as the Research Coordinator for the Young African American Males Project at G.S.U. He is a graduate of the New Pacific Academy for gay activism in San Francisco, a Fellow of Gay Men's Health Crisis in New York, a founding member of Adodi Muse performance ensemble, and served as co-Grand Marshal for the 1993 Atlanta Pride Parade.

For the future, Duncan sees himself perhaps moving out of the field of activism, and back into the arts, his first love. Whatever he does, he wants to stay well-traveled, in all senses of the word. Quoting a favorite lyric, he says, "I hope I'll be able to spread love."

Dreams

by Langston Hughes

Hold fast to dreams,
for if dreams die,
life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly.

Hold fast to dreams,
for if dreams go,
life is a barren field frozen with snow.

Pauline Clance: Reflections on First E.'s First 20

by Barry Stewart Mann

Pauline Clance has been an instrumental presence and force in the history of First E. She came to Atlanta in 1974 to work in the Psychology Department at Georgia State, the same time that Lanier Clance came to Atlanta.

"For many years, Lanier dreamed of starting a community like First E. For me, the thought was far-out, fantastic, difficult. But it seemed important — nothing existed to combine the things that Lanier was interested in."

Pauline remembers that, as Lanier formulated the concept of an existential fellowship, she and Nancy Zumoff both gave him immense counsel and support. It was a family endeavor.

"We gave encouragement, listened a lot, helped out economically. I had a side that was scared, but I told Lanier he had to try. I had long been an existentialist. I'm an existentialist Gestalt Therapist, so for me existentialism is a foundation of my work. As a therapist, I saw the need for the kind of things he had in mind — to bring people together to explore the meaning of life, to share diverse views."

"And," she adds, "the importance of *doing* things — service, creating opportunities. For existentialists, what you do is important, not just what you think or believe."

Looking back over these amazing twenty years, what have been the biggest challenges?

"Getting a building was important. It meant freedom and opportunity for us.

"At different points, it has been challenging to deal with problems that arise when people take their individuality seriously. One guy decided that freedom meant he could take off his clothes. Or people who monopolize, or who are aggressive or violent. Figuring out how individual rights fit into the life of the group or community can be a challenge.

"The real critical period was when Lanier had health problems. The congregation showed that they could take leadership, that it's not just Lanier, that there is a community of leaders determined to keep First E. going in his absence. For me that was both a low point and a high point — going through Lanier's illness with him, and seeing the community rally together in support."

Over the years, Pauline, Nancy and Lanier as a family have lent tremendous support in every way to First E.

Comes the Dawn

After awhile you learn the subtle difference
Between holding a hand and chaining a soul,
And you learn that love doesn't mean security,
And you begin to learn that kisses aren't contracts,
And presents aren't promises
And you begin to accept your defeats
With your head up and your eyes open,
With the grace of a woman, not the grief of a child,
And you learn to build all your roads
On today because tomorrow's ground
Is too uncertain, And futures have
A way of falling down in midflight,
After awhile you learn that even sunshine burns if you get too much.
So you plant your own garden and decorate your own soul
Instead of waiting for someone to bring you flowers.
And you learn that you really can endure. . . .
That you really are strong.
And you really do have worth
And you learn and learn
With every goodbye you learn.

—Veronica A. Shoffstall
(submitted by Marrilee)

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Music, Dance, Song, Poetry
Starring the Many Talented First E. Players

An Evening of Music
Coff-EE, tea, sodas and baked goods available.

Cost $5 at the door
Proceeds to benefit the congregation and performers
Children and teens are welcome!

Thanks to Rita's Manuscript Finishing for donation of her time to do the desktop publishing of the First E. newsletter. She also does all kinds of word processing, specializing in foreign language work, and offers free spelling corrections (English), and conversions of PC files to and from Mac files.